

# From Participatory Promises to Partisan Capture:

## Local Democratic Transitions and Mexican Water Politics

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The creation of participatory institutions has been the hallmark of democratic transitions in countries around the world. Participatory institutions delegate decision-making authority directly to citizens, most often in local politics. Development organizations such as the World Bank and USAID have promoted participatory institutions to foster more accountability in government, improve public services, and strengthen social capital in young democracies. Many countries experienced simultaneous processes of democratization and decentralization, two macro-level reforms that often featured the creation of participatory institutions.

Many scholars assume the institutional sustainability of participatory innovation, yet there is little analysis of whether participatory institutions created during local democratic transitions have been sustainable over time. Examining cases of initially successful participatory institutions, ones that were “most likely” to endure, yet, over time, failed to do so, this article presents a causal pathway argument for understanding the conditions under which politicians are likely to switch their policy preferences for participatory innovation. This article provides evidence that there is variation in participatory institutional survival that merits further study.

This article examines local democratic transitions in Mexican municipalities and the concurrent construction of new participatory institutions by new political parties after seventy years of political hegemony by the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*). I use process tracing (or within-case analysis) based on extensive field research for two cases, San Miguel de Allende and Irapuato, where the opposition party that came to power was aided electorally by its rhetorical emphasis on creating more participatory and pluralistic government. However, while the newly elected right-of-center PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*) parties in these two cities effectively created successful participatory institutions, over time, they lost their autonomy and were overtaken by partisan agendas.

While many studies of participatory institutions focus on participatory budgeting or multi-sector citizen councils, this study examines participatory institutions in one policy sector—urban water delivery—to better explain the relationship between participatory institutions and the outcome that many “participators” hope to achieve: more effective government services. An analysis of participatory institutions in water services reveals the value that elected officials have placed on opening up participatory spaces in this crucial public policy arena governed almost exclusively by local officials.

Why did initially successful participatory experiments in these two Mexican cities result in the consolidation of partisan capture, rather than the augmenting of participatory practices? First, I find that as cities implemented extensive and high-profile water reforms that led to substantial revenue from public service fees and a “good government” reputation, citizen board members that oversaw these reforms became local power brokers. Citizen boards became highly contested spaces as partisan factions, opposition parties, popular sector actors, and business elites vied for control. Second, the PAN’s “participatory brand” served a dual purpose: it allowed the PAN to distinguish itself from PRI corporatism to win office while also serving as an important rhetorical—and in some cases, *de facto*—political resource that allowed the PAN to reduce PRI clientelist networks with popular sector groups and build new electoral constituencies with middle class voters and business elites. Despite the initial usefulness of the “participatory brand,” PAN mayors eventually viewed making good on that promise a threat to their power and moved to eliminate citizen boards’ autonomy.

This article argues that support for participatory institutions is high for opposition parties who have historically been locked out of power because participatory institutional change provides political tools for challenging parties. These tools include not only opportunities for “democratic” branding during historic elections through promises of transparency and participation, but they also represent concrete opportunities to undermine entrenched ties that benefit incumbent parties. However, when a challenging party becomes the incumbent party, these preferences for participatory institutions may change. Participatory service delivery institutions may become liabilities as avenues for dissent. More importantly, they can become less preferable than the alternative of using services (especially well-operating, lucrative ones), as political spoils that can be used to consolidate party control. In the absence of societal groups that exhibit strong, coordinated support for participatory institutions and simultaneously possess the political clout to superimpose their preferences onto new mayoral leadership, politicians may disavow prior electoral promises and change their support for participatory institutions.

While prior scholarship on policy switching has emphasized that changing post-election mandates are likely due to politicians purposefully misrepresenting their original intentions, or as a post-election adjustment to major crisis, this article argues that switching policy mandates for participatory institutions may occur due to the very success of those participatory innovations. These findings reveal a disturbing tension between democratization and participation in Mexico and beyond.

## **Democratic Transitions, Participatory Institutions, and Local Public Services**

**Citizen Boards as Participatory Innovation** As democratic transitions and decentralization have swept developing countries in recent decades, the creation of citizen boards for public services has been an important tool for reformers involved in decentralization. International development agencies and host governments have promoted citizen boards as antidotes to the historically centralized decision-making processes that characterized many forms of urban public services provision. “Politicization” of public services under this previous system included misuse of revenue from public services, rampant patronage appointments, provision of highly subsidized public services in exchange for political support, blocking political opponents from accessing public services, and condoning corruption and bribery by lower-level administrators.

Citizen boards function as “boards of directors” for public institutions in order to ensure the institutions’ autonomy from the state. Citizen boards are designed to allow elected citizen representatives to oversee the functioning of a public institution rather than to provide an open and deliberative forum by which all citizens may directly influence policymaking. As such, citizen boards are by design less deliberative and may be less open than participatory institutions such as open public assemblies, neighborhood committees, and participatory budgeting and planning institutions discussed in the participatory institutions literature.<sup>1</sup> However, citizen boards for public services directly incorporate citizens into state-sanctioned policymaking venues and therefore are formal institutional venues for increased citizen participation, comprising an important example of “participatory innovation.” Citizen boards are in many ways designed to have an even more direct influence on local policymaking than participatory “experiments” such as participatory budgeting or participatory planning because they directly oversee a public institution rather than providing auxiliary input. Citizen boards for public services are designed to institutionalize participation in local decision-making processes in order to increase accountability and improve the functioning of public services. The few published studies on these types of citizen institutions suggest that citizen boards can be found in a range of sectors, such as electoral institutions, healthcare, and public services.<sup>2</sup>

Citizen boards are particularly pervasive in the urban water sector, as a changing global water policy environment has placed emphasis on creating decentralized participatory institutions.<sup>3</sup> Citizen water boards are designed to reduce political interference in local services provision. Reformers argue that if citizen boards—composed of consumer representatives, civil society members, and a limited number of government officials—are directly responsible for management decisions and long-term planning of public services, services will better reflect consumer preferences and generate greater consumer buy-in.

This article examines the creation of citizen boards in Mexican urban water utilities as part of a nationwide decentralization program that occurred alongside local-level democratization beginning in the 1980s. As opposition parties entered local office for the first time after decades of PRI hegemonic rule across three levels of government in

Mexico, the creation of decentralized citizen boards became an important aspect of multi-party rule. While participatory institutions have been created throughout the country under all political parties, citizen water boards created in PAN municipalities and states often boasted the greatest amount of *de jure* autonomy and pluralism. For example, in PRI-led states, citizen boards were created but often retained the corporatist model of closed and top-down decision-making. In contrast, in PAN-ruled states like Guanajuato, the model for citizen boards has been characterized by institutional autonomy.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising because PAN mayoral candidates promised greater transparency and accountability as part of their electoral strategy in the 1990s, a phenomenon I refer to as the PAN's "participatory brand." The PAN's participatory approach generated high expectations regarding increased citizen influence in local government.

**Democratic Transitions and Participatory Institutions in Mexico** While democratic transitions initially generated an extensive body of scholarship focused on explaining democratization as discrete stages—breakthrough, transition, consolidation—more recent studies have demonstrated that democratic transitions can lead to a range of undemocratic institutions. Scholars have employed different labels for these "political gray zones," such as hybrid regimes, competitive authoritarianism, and electoral authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> Few autocratic regimes have been as durable as the PRI in Mexico, a one-party regime that successfully exploited patronage resources, electoral fraud, and divisions within the opposition to sustain seven decades of political hegemony. While studies have examined important factors that led to Mexico's authoritarian regime breakdown, such as economic crisis and electoral reform,<sup>6</sup> less attention has been paid to how local opposition party victories were facilitated by their reliance on participatory rhetoric and institutions following the democratic transition. The lack of attention paid to the role of local participatory institutions in Mexico's democratic transition is surprising given that democratic transitions first began at the subnational level in the 1980s and 1990s, when opposition parties gained practice in governing and building electoral networks prior to national-level democratization in 2000.

The participatory governance literature has investigated the conditions under which participatory governance institutions following decentralization result in increased accountability, government responsiveness, and improved public services. Much of this literature's point of reference is the exceptional, but singular, example of the participatory governance success of Porto Alegre, Brazil,<sup>7</sup> but more recent comparative studies have found important variations in the success of these programs. Variables such as mayoral leadership,<sup>8</sup> weak opposition party institutionalization, and program design<sup>9</sup> have been linked with strong participatory governance institutions.

Research on participatory innovation is centrally concerned with whether participatory venues can be designed in such a way to eliminate clientelism. Analysts have documented the pervasiveness of clientelism in undermining democratic participation in Mexico. While some scholars remain hopeful that broad-based

participation can strengthen democratic quality in Mexico,<sup>10</sup> others have suggested that clientelism and corporatist interest intermediation can persist even after opposition parties have come to power.<sup>11</sup>

Observers have noted the right-of-center PAN's use of local-level participatory venues as an attempt to fulfill "reform" promises, particularly in PAN's very first local governments during the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Building on the limited research on the PAN's use of participatory innovation, this article traces the PAN's use of "participatory branding" to consolidate new means of electoral support after historic democratic transitions. I document the role of participatory institutions in the water sector in generating support for the young party and improving local service provision, and the eventual erosion of participatory autonomy once it threatened the power of "outsiders turned incumbents."

### **Understanding Policy Switching in Participatory Institutions**

What does mandate representation, or the extent to which candidates keep or switch their policy commitments from initial campaign promises, reveal about the sustainability of democratic institutions? Studies on developed countries tend to agree that electorates use partisan cues to cast votes for broad ideological mandates that are then acted out by rational politicians.<sup>13</sup> In the developing world context, where partisan ideology and party discipline are weaker, mandate representation is often fragile. Guillermo O'Donnell terms this phenomenon "delegative democracy," a subtype of democracy where voters are not represented in the subsequent policy implementations of winning candidates.<sup>14</sup>

While many democratic theorists, such as O'Donnell, argue that weak mandate representation is bad for democracy, others have noted that policy switching is sometimes justifiable in order to achieve desirable policy outcomes. Andreas Schedler notes that there are "rules of exception" or justifiable abandonment of policy promises.<sup>15</sup> In Susan Stokes' analysis of electoral politics and neoliberal reforms in Latin America, she finds that sometimes it may be necessary for candidates to implement policies that are dramatically different than what they proposed on the campaign trail.<sup>16</sup>

When might politicians switch their support for a particular set of policies after elections? First, in a Machiavellian light, politicians may purposefully deceive the electorate (by making campaign promises that they intend to not keep) in order to win an election. Second, politicians may purposefully deceive the electorate because they believe that the reform package that will render the best material and distributional outcomes would be politically unpopular and that the benefits of these policy decisions will only be evident to voters after they have been implemented.<sup>17</sup> Third, politicians may alter policy programs after entering office due to unexpected structural changes, such as economic crisis or natural disaster, that make implementing campaign promises difficult or no longer suitable. Fourth, politicians may receive "new information" once in office, or understand the implications of policy outcomes with greater complexity

(which Philip Tetlock calls “cognitive adjustment”) that renders the original campaign policy promises less likely to produce desirable policy outcomes.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to evaluate in retrospect whether politicians make a particular campaign promise earnestly or with the intention to switch. Yet, regardless of initial intentions, the political utility of a policy position for an elected official may change during the course of governing. When do policy commitments change with respect to participatory institutions, and how does the changing political utility of participatory institutions impact their sustainability?

Successful participatory experiments of citizen boards for service provision can create a host of positive outcomes that can then, paradoxically, serve to undermine their very sustainability, as these “successes” can threaten the power of local elected officials. The initial positive outcomes may be, for example, improving the quality of public services or the policy arena in which the citizen board is charged with overseeing. In successful participatory institutions, initial decision-making autonomy may disentrench clientelistic obligations and reduce patronage appointments that can undermine improvements in local government. Decision-making autonomy and pluralistic participation of a wider group of citizens than those who previously ruled unilaterally can widen the scope of who participates, making these venues more democratic and representative of the views of a wider range of citizens.

Yet, perversely, these successful participatory practices can represent, over time, threats to the power of opposition parties once they become incumbents. Citizen board members who enjoy autonomy, positive reputations, local standing, and media access can threaten the power of local elected officials. Pluralism and deliberation can become venues for dissent and can foster partisan agendas and policy positions contrary to the ruling party’s platform. Therefore, policy switching may occur due to changing power dynamics between successful participatory experiment leaders and local political parties.

Participatory service delivery institutions may be able to avoid partisan capture under certain conditions. An initial precondition for participatory institutional sustainability is repeated support from incoming mayors over time. However, what is likely to undergird mayoral support for participatory institutions is the presence of societal groups (such as middle class associations, industrial sectors, or popular sector groups) who not only favor participatory institutions, but who also possess sufficient local political clout to serve as a counterweight to a mayor’s propensity to engage in partisan capture, and are also sufficiently organized to press their participatory agenda with incoming mayors. Mayors would need to believe that confronting these groups would be more politically damaging than disbanding autonomous participatory institutions. These groups may represent an effective counterweight to mayoral control either because these groups have sufficient economic clout in the city (e.g., business groups) or because they have sufficient societal clout, or propensity to disrupt, mobilize, and make their agenda heard through mass mobilization (e.g., popular sector associations). These hypothesized conditions were missing in Irapuato and San Miguel de Allende, as the subsequent case studies will illustrate, and mayors had no societal

counterbalance to check their propensity to engage in partisan capture once participatory institutions no longer suited their political interests.

## **Methodology**

This article examines urban cases in Mexico, where, like many Latin American countries, extensive decentralization and democratization reforms have transformed local governments, bringing in a range of new political and societal actors that had previously been locked out of power. In service of the principle research question that investigates the sustainability of participatory institutions, the research design is a within-case analysis of two cities using a “most likely” case selection strategy (a subtype of the “crucial case”). Therefore, cases are selected that exhibit characteristics that make them highly likely to confirm a theory or analytical expectation.<sup>19</sup>

The participatory institutions in these two cases were most likely to endure over time because, as I elaborate in the next section, 1) the ruling political party had clearly stated support for participatory institutions at both the state and local levels, 2) the supportive political party won multiple consecutive elections, so they had a stable and long window to reinforce this new institutional arrangement, 3) the state government received international financial support to promote local participatory institutions that should have incentivized compliance, and 4) the initially successful outcomes of the new participatory institutional arrangements made them likely to endure. Despite all these factors, these participatory institutions still reverted to partisan capture. The failure of these “most likely” participatory institutions to retain their autonomy and pluralism over time provides strong evidence for the need to revisit assumptions about sustainability in participatory innovation.

My analysis employs “within-case” analysis, or process tracing, to examine the “decision process” actors used, the stimuli to which actors responded, and the impact of institutions on behavior.<sup>20</sup> This method allows me to specify sequential steps in the causal mechanism and identify a causal pathway from initial conditions to the outcome in question (partisan capture). Key to the causal pathway approach is fine-grained analysis of sequenced events over time, which provides a “moving film” rather than a “snapshot” understanding of participatory institutions.<sup>21</sup> This study postulates that the causal mechanism is contextually grounded and sequenced over time such that the causal mechanism’s impact depends heavily on when reform occurred (participatory institution building directly following democratic transitions).<sup>22</sup>

I conduct process tracing on two cases that are “pairs,” they exhibit similar initial conditions and lead to similar scores on the outcome in question (high partisan capture).<sup>23</sup> I analyze two cases, rather than a single case study, in order to draw multiple observations for each step in the causal pathway (from pluralism to partisan capture) in two distinct “most likely” empirical settings. This facilitates refinement of the causal steps in a process tracing study. The use of two cases also provides more confidence that the causal pathway has potential to hold for other cases with similar conditions, rather

than just being unique to one case. I gather evidence from a wide range of sources, including ninety-six interviews in Guanajuato State and Mexico City, government documents, newspaper articles, and archival material.

## **Water Policy, Citizen Water Boards, and the PAN's "Participatory Brand"**

**Federal Water Policy and Decentralization** Citizen water boards in Mexico were created to facilitate the "de-politicization" of water services following the highly centralized and subsidized period of water management under the PRI. The PRI had either directly or indirectly managed water systems in nearly 1,000 cities through a centralized bureaucracy, while local party officials managed the majority of remaining systems, approximately 1,225,<sup>24</sup> with federal funds controlled by PRI officials in the center. During this time, water prices were highly subsidized, and it was widely understood that both prices and services were connected to levels of political support.<sup>25</sup> Decentralization in the water sector was a component of a larger nationwide decentralization campaign throughout the 1990s,<sup>26</sup> whereby water services were transferred to municipal and state governments, effectively eliminating the federal government's direct intervention in service delivery.<sup>27</sup>

The decentralization program also entailed the creation of legally and fiscally autonomous water utilities governed by citizen boards rather than by municipal departments. International development agencies viewed the "politicization" of water services as a key factor hindering water delivery throughout the developing world.<sup>28</sup> Proponents of decentralization in Mexico argued that decentralization would allow citizens to be more directly involved in how user fees were spent, generating greater consumer "buy-in" for water services.<sup>29</sup> World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank loans to Mexico's water sector between 1973 and 1994 totaled 1.2 billion USD<sup>30</sup> and were largely premised on the creation of legally autonomous water utilities with a depoliticized citizen oversight structure, or citizen "board of directors."<sup>31</sup>

In Mexico, PRI officials created the National Water Commission in 1989 and charged it with establishing decentralized water utilities with citizen boards throughout the country to increase user participation. A policy brief published by the National Water Commission noted,

[There has been] a profound change in the juridical and institutional administration of [water]. . . [necessitating] a growing co-responsibility, and user participation and society, more broadly, for executing tasks that were once thought to belong exclusively to the state.<sup>32</sup>

The federal government created new rules governing municipalities' access to federal loans for water infrastructure construction, whereby urban centers were only eligible if they had formed decentralized water utilities with citizen board oversight. Consequently, decentralized water utilities with citizen water boards were established throughout Mexico in the 1990s, mostly under PRI mayors who structured the boards

in a corporatist manner—appointing themselves as board presidents and local party loyalists as board members.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the country, municipalities and state governments adopted the model of citizen water boards for decentralized water utilities, but the extent to which they were corporatist or authentically pluralistic varied dramatically.

**Decentralization, Participation, and the PAN in Guanajuato State** In Guanajuato, the PAN's historic, consecutive wins of the governorship beginning in 1991 shaped the adoption of federal decentralization mandates and the creation of citizen water boards at the state level. Compared to the previous PRI regime, the state's water policy under the PAN was characterized by a pluralist and participatory approach.

Scholars writing about the PAN's ideology often reference PAN founder Manuel Gómez Morín's belief in pluralism and an independent citizenry. Reflecting on the shortcomings of Mexican democracy following the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s, Gómez Morín in 1935 noted, "We lack citizenship, we had not been formed as citizens, we had no [prior] experience with citizenship. . .we had not had a chance to organize our democracy."<sup>34</sup> The party's founding principles were premised on "as much society as possible, as much government as necessary,"<sup>35</sup> whereby the state was to intervene in matters only when civil society was unable. The PAN's founding principles also resisted centralism and promoted authentic federalism as a means of democratizing Mexico.<sup>36</sup> From its inception, the PAN served as an alternative to Cardenas-era reforms geared towards the popular sectors and instead coalesced support among property owners, middle class professionals, and business elites.<sup>37</sup>

When Carlos Medina became the first PAN governor of Guanajuato in 1992, he frequently invoked the PAN maxim of "as much society as possible and as little government as necessary." Medina was primarily concerned with political reform and used the call for greater participation as a "principal political and ideological resource" when undertaking reform initiatives.<sup>38</sup> Governor Medina and other newly elected PAN mayors made several attempts to incorporate society into government and directly resolve problems.<sup>39</sup> His administration emphasized horizontal links with municipal governments and citizens in a variety of newly created programs and regular meetings with mayors.<sup>40</sup> Analysts have viewed these initiatives—which were not uncommon in newly PAN governments across the country—as attempts to dismantle PRI clientelist ties with segments of society across a wide range of policy arenas and as a means to generate political reform.<sup>41</sup> Medina was at the forefront of the effort to promote greater citizen participation through the creation of citizen boards.<sup>42</sup>

The PAN's emphasis on promoting pluralism and political reform at the state level coincided with a federal water sector reform premised on the principle of depoliticizing services through the creation of decentralized urban water utilities with citizen boards. Reform initiatives in the water sector were intended to respond to dramatically deteriorated service quality by the 1970s, as economic crisis and urbanization had led to

stalled network expansion, endemic water intermittency, and increased water borne illness throughout the country.<sup>43</sup>

Under the PAN administrations of Carlos Medina (1991–1995) and Vicente Fox (1995–1999) in Guanajuato, a number of reforms occurred in the state’s water sector that promoted decentralization, pluralism, and more citizen involvement, both to address ongoing water crises as well as to undertake political reform. First, shortly after the federal government transferred water utility control to the states in 1991, Guanajuato’s state water commission transferred responsibility for service delivery directly to municipalities.<sup>44</sup> This differed from other state governments that centralized water services after the initial federal transfer. In addition, Guanajuato passed a state water law in 2000 with a number of citizen participation mandates. The State Water Commission was to be created with a board of directors that included active citizen participation from all societal sectors. In addition, the law created COTAS, or “Consejos Técnicos del Agua,” which were decentralized river basin organizations that included representatives from universities, professional organizations, social sectors, business, NGOs, and residential users.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, the government created a statewide hydraulic plan that called for extensive collaboration with a wide range of water users, a plan that was formulated through fifty meetings with civil society groups over a two-year period. The result was a state hydraulic plan with high levels of participatory input.<sup>46</sup> These were some of the many initiatives the State Water Commission introduced to promote greater citizen involvement in water management.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the state water law allowed municipalities to determine how citizen water boards were to be structured, rather than mandate that mayors be board presidents, as had occurred in other PRI-governed states. Guanajuato’s emphasis on citizen participation in water sector governance was so successful, it helped attract the first ever World Bank water sector loan (38 million USD) to a Mexican state government in 2005.<sup>48</sup> International financing for Guanajuato’s water sector, and the subsequent availability of funds to support augmenting participation, increased the likelihood of citizen water boards being successful participatory innovations. An architect of the state’s participatory hydraulic institutional design recalled, “In Guanajuato we bet on social participation, and the joint work between society and government. Not all states have this political vision, nor [do they have] the same amount of citizen interest in participating.”<sup>49</sup>

As the PAN won electoral victories throughout Guanajuato State in the 1990s, the party’s leaders were poised to implement their “participatory brand” in several local policy arenas. In 1991, the PAN won control of twelve municipal governments; with the exception of Irapuato, the PAN won all major cities within the state’s industrial corridor. In 1997, elections in Guanajuato brought twenty PAN mayors to power in cities with over 70 percent of the state’s population.<sup>50</sup>

The following section analyzes the PAN’s initial cultivation of its “participatory brand” in water delivery in two cities—San Miguel de Allende and Irapuato—that showed remarkably similar levels of initial participatory openness before the eventual partisan capture of both of their citizen water boards.

## The Cases

**San Miguel de Allende: Initial High Pluralism, Eventual Partisan Control** San Miguel de Allende was the first municipality to become independent of Spanish rule during the Mexican War of Independence and today is a UNESCO World Heritage site and tourist destination with a population of over 160,000.<sup>51</sup> Water access has been an important issue in the city, especially as the tourist industry developed within the historic downtown, far from highland underground aquifers. The municipality had administered water services through its public works office prior to the 1990s when the onset of decentralization and democratization coincided in the city. After the first PAN mayor, Salvador García (1992–1994), came to office in a historic and contentious race, it granted the water utility fiscal and legal independence. Upon coming to power, the new PAN mayor faced the challenges of governing amid the vestiges of PRI clientelism and corporatism.

**The Relationship between Participatory Rhetoric and Reform** For PAN party leaders, the creation of a citizen board for San Miguel de Allende's water utility complemented their interest in promoting the party as more transparent and accountable than the PRI. The board's initial composition reflected this emphasis on pluralism and non-state mediated participation in several respects. First, several PAN mayoral administrations created citizen boards through open calls for nominations in order to generate candidate lists and then facilitated open elections decided by majority vote. The nominations came from many different constituencies: businesses, professional associations (engineering, architecture, etc.), and residential neighborhood associations (including popular sector representatives). One former citizen board member recalls,

The municipality organized the election, but it was really the assembly of users who decided. The invitation for board membership was directed at neighborhood leaders, business association leaders. [ . . . ] In this sense it didn't have the characteristic of the mayor saying "I just won the municipal election, and I'm going to decide unilaterally." It was an open election.<sup>52</sup>

Second, the board's bylaws dictated that citizens were only eligible for board membership if they did not already hold elected office or party leadership positions.<sup>53</sup> The first citizen board president admits that he was not a party insider, "I was sure that no one would vote for me because no one knew me outside of the architecture association, so I was surprised when I won."<sup>54</sup> Third, popular sector representatives were allowed to run for board membership.

The citizen board in San Miguel de Allende, supported by a PAN mayor, began a series of water sector reforms that were premised on altering the relationships between voters and political parties. PRI leaders had historically negotiated subsidized or free water services with a wide range of consumers in exchange for electoral support. As one member of the citizen board from 1992 to 1994 noted, "There were a series of different types of privileges . . . from the very poor to the very rich . . . slowly we broke with that

clientelist exchange.”<sup>55</sup> Many powerful actors lost their privileged water access, including ex-PRI mayors and politically connected neighborhood association leaders. Ultimately, eliminating historic agreements for free water reduced the PRI’s mobilization networks across all income groups, but particularly among the popular sectors.

In addition to eliminating subsidized water arrangements, dramatic price increases (80 percent in 1993 alone, for example) also generated significant backlash from popular sectors.<sup>56</sup> Conflicts within San Miguel de Allende’s citizen water board during its first administration reflected divisions between the popular sector user representatives (who rejected price increases and helped stage strikes and protests) and technocrats and PAN party members (who supported price increases for all users). For technocrats like the board president, price increases were the only way to improve services.<sup>57</sup> For PAN party leaders, eliminating historic subsidies and increasing prices primarily hurt the PRI’s constituent base. Because the PAN was new in San Miguel de Allende and lacked a dependable local network of political support, improving services through price increases represented an opportunity to gain support from users outside the popular sectors, such as middle- and upper-income users and tourist-oriented restaurants and hotels, who, through the years, showed a willingness to pay higher water tariffs for improved water services. Although initially popular sectors organized against price increases, negotiated, ad-hoc subsidies to low-income groups helped lessen social conflicts around water reforms.<sup>58</sup>

The PAN sought both to differentiate itself from the PRI and to develop new forms of political support. Publicizing citizen board elections as open to the public helped the PAN to develop a “participatory brand” that demonstrated that the party’s leaders could make good on campaign promises of increased citizen influence and accountability in local government. Democratic elections of citizen water board members were a drastic departure from PRI-era unilateral decision-making. Producing concrete policy manifestations of the PAN’s “participatory” promises—such as citizen water boards designed to be autonomous from partisan control—also aided in lessening conflicts surrounding water price increases.

Citizen boards during the first PAN administrations in San Miguel de Allende were deliberative and democratic. As one former board member explained, “Practically all the opinions were achieved through consensus... (in contrast with city hall) ...we would argue strongly and then we would decide together.”<sup>59</sup> The extensive reform agenda that began in the mid-1990s was facilitated, in part, by this collaborative and democratic approach.

The city’s first several PAN mayors also respected the water utility’s autonomy and insisted that consumers with complaints about price increases contact the water utility directly. As one former board member explained, “The first eight to ten years were lovely... the politicians did not interfere with us at all.”<sup>60</sup> Initially, it was relatively easy for mayors to grant autonomy to the water utility, given that the utility was essentially bankrupt.<sup>61</sup>

However, the water utility’s visibility changed dramatically over the course of the first ten years. The change in service quality from the mid-1990s to 2012 was

remarkable: the utility went from serving 11,000 connections in 1994 (most of which only received water a few days a week) to 25,000 connections with nearly 24/7 service throughout the entire city by 2012. Increases in water quantity were due to the doubling of water resources created by drilling into new underground aquifers as well as rehabilitating older ones. In addition, the amount of metering throughout the city (which allowed the utility to determine how much water individual consumers were using) increased from 10 to 100 percent during this period.<sup>62</sup> These reforms were partially financed by price increases and applied to residential and commercial users with limited increases to low-income groups, which helped generate enough revenue to access federal funding for major infrastructure works and rehabilitation.<sup>63</sup> In addition to deepening the participatory nature of the reform process, successful reforms led politicians to view the water utility as an important political resource worth controlling.

**Declining Pluralism and Autonomy in Citizen Water Boards** Over the course of several PAN municipal administrations in San Miguel de Allende,<sup>64</sup> the level of pluralism in the citizen water boards declined in several respects. First, while the initial citizen board included popular sector representatives, subsequent boards were mostly composed of individuals from professional associations and businesses.<sup>65</sup> Popular sector groups had protested board policies such as price increases, suspending service for nonpayment and eliminating clandestine connections, and technocrats viewed their presence on the board as yielding too much influence to “populists.” The institutional mandates for autonomy and transparency changed with each administration, as PAN members manipulated procedural rules in order to limit the amount of “non-elite” citizen influence in urban water services.<sup>66</sup> These alterations included changes to the citizen board bylaws requiring the inclusion of a larger share of participants from business and middle class professional associations rather than from social organizations representing the PRI and left-of-center Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) interests.

Perhaps most significantly, by 1998, the city’s PAN administration ended open elections to the water board and began to appoint members based on predetermined negotiations made within city hall.<sup>67</sup> As the water utility grew in stature, some board presidents began to use it as a political stepping-stone. As one board member from the 2004–2006 administration noted,

Users would receive their water utility bill and notice that the board president’s face was plastered on it . . . these were large advertisements, in full color, paid for by the water utility. After leaving the citizen board, he ran for the local Senate and won.<sup>68</sup>

City hall members and mayors noticed the growing importance of the water utility: increased revenues, higher quality services, and a favorable public reputation. As water services improved, so did the opportunities for partisan intervention. Citizen water board positions, although initially determined by open calls to civil society groups and open vote elections, after the 2000s became patronage positions determined directly by mayors and City Council members. One insider admits,

Despite such democratic and non-partisan intentions within the board's regulations . . . who makes the decision? City hall makes the decision . . . and they can negotiate with whom yes and with whom no . . . if a party that won by majority is in city hall, they have already decided who they will put in . . . they have it predetermined before the election . . . and that is where the process can become perverse . . . it is unfortunate and sad, but that is how it works.<sup>69</sup>

Although the city had a united group of water technocrats, middle class users, and a tourist industry that supported the water reform agenda, they were not organized and mobilized specifically around protecting the citizen water boards' autonomy, which opened up space for ambitious new mayors to manipulate the citizen water board for partisan gains.

Partisan capture was evident in the 2009 citizen water board nominations. When the PRI/PRD coalition mayor, Luz María Núñez (2009–2012), won office by a small margin, she attempted to broker a deal, offering to distribute citizen water board positions based on parties' percentage of seats in City Council. However, the mayor was unable to gain the support of the PAN bloc, which hoped that the PAN would win the next mayoral election by a majority and be able to appoint the entire citizen board.<sup>70</sup>

Political parties in San Miguel de Allende have become increasingly interested in using the water utility for political gains. While international development agencies worried that Mexico's water utilities were overly politicized when directly under central government and later mayoral control, "autonomous" citizen boards that have successfully improved water services have created high-profile (and free) press for their citizen board presidents and other influential board members. Successful water delivery improvements have generated political opportunities for citizen board members, as a former citizen board member explained,

From the citizen water boards have emerged *regidores* . . . *diputados locales* . . . in this election, the citizen water board president ran for mayor. . . . Yes, there is a political component, and those interested in politics are interested in becoming board members. Today, there are dozens of people who want to be board members for that very reason . . . they are interested because they think that this may be a political trampoline. . . .<sup>71</sup>

**Irapuato: Initial Moderate Pluralism, Contentious Reform, and Eventual Partisan Control** Irapuato is the second-largest city in Guanajuato with a population of 529,440.<sup>72</sup> It has a diverse economy, including a strong manufacturing sector. Irapuato's water utility was created in 1984, when it adopted a citizen board as a condition for receiving funds from the World Bank through a loan program administered by the Mexican federal government.<sup>73</sup> Similarly to San Miguel de Allende, Irapuato's water utility did not undertake an extensive reform program until the city's first PAN administration took office.

**Moderate Pluralist Citizen Boards and Contentious Reform** Although the institutional framework for Irapuato's citizen water board had been adopted when the water utility was created under PRI mayor Sebastián Martínez (1983–1985), the board functioned as a corporatist institution when it was under PRI control.

When the city's first PAN mayor, Salvador Pérez, won office in 1997, he embraced citizen participation within local services, much as the first PAN mayor of San Miguel de Allende had done. One interviewee recalled that the new mayor sought to make the citizen boards more authentically pluralistic, "The political benefit was to demonstrate that they were different from the PRI, that they did things how they should be done."<sup>74</sup>

Influenced by the participatory rhetoric of PAN leaders, particularly Governor Medina, Mayor Salvador Pérez (1997–2000) and Mayor Ricardo Ortiz (2000–2003) supported the citizen water boards and allowed for a bidding process open to all civil society members. The city's first several PAN administrations made institutional amendments to limit partisan influence on board membership. For example, the board's bylaws were amended so it would have nine citizen board members—one president, one treasurer, one secretary, and six other members. Members would be nominated by each corresponding group according to the following formula: one representative from the local business association, the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE); one member from one of the professional associations (e.g., lawyers, architects, engineers); and four members from civil society at large. Only the treasurer would be appointed directly by city hall.<sup>75</sup> Once the board had been comprised, board members would select its president through an open vote. Unlike prior PRI corporatist boards, the new PAN citizen boards in Irapuato prohibited direct mayoral appointments of board members and held board elections in different years from municipal elections to discourage patronage appointments following electoral cycles. However, unlike in San Miguel de Allende, whose first boards included low-income consumers, the four additional civil society members on the Irapuato boards were, in practice, always drawn from business and professional colleges, which limited popular sector consumers' ability to attain board membership.<sup>76</sup>

Similar to San Miguel de Allende, the water utility in Irapuato began a reform process premised on breaking historic clientelist ties between PRI officials and a wide range of water users. The elimination of subsidies was especially contentious in Irapuato, due to the role of land invasions and the development of informal settlements in the city prior to 1980. In order to appease social protest and their electoral base during the 1990s, PRI mayors agreed to dozens of special agreements (*convenios*) for vastly reduced water prices brokered by popular sector neighborhood association leaders.<sup>77</sup> In addition, because the city's citizen water board had been created when the water utility was first decentralized in 1984 under the PRI corporatist model, PRI business leaders on the board were able to extend subsidies to their own businesses, and the PRI citizen board included party activists from different segments of society who each negotiated special discounts.<sup>78</sup>

As a result, the social backlash generated by price increases and the elimination of subsidies was much more severe in Irapuato than in San Miguel de Allende. During a period of two PAN administrations (1997–2000 and 2000–2003), the water utility began refusing to acknowledge collective payments by neighborhood association leaders and insisted on increasing prices and holding individual consumers responsible for their water consumption.<sup>79</sup>

Widespread protest ensued: in 2001 and 2002, the municipal administrative disputes office received 1,250 official complaints for abuses related to water service delivery. Complaints about water price increases far exceeded any other local issue, as they constituted 86 percent of all complaints filed during this time.<sup>80</sup> Neighborhood association leaders organized sit-ins and marches; the water utility was rocked by organized protest for much of the first two PAN administrations.<sup>81</sup> Water price increases became a highly partisan conflict, with PAN leaders in Irapuato insisting on eliminating subsidies and local PRI leaders resisting price increases, often as part of an electoral campaign.<sup>82</sup> Similar to the citizen board strategies in San Miguel de Allende, over time Irapuato's board members negotiated ad-hoc subsidies and pricing agreements for low-income users that helped lessen the backlash against reforms from popular sector groups.

**Declining Pluralism and Loss of Autonomy in Citizen Water Boards** Similar to San Miguel de Allende, water sector reforms in Irapuato were politically beneficial to the PAN, both because enforced collection payment undermined the PRI's mobilization networks and because it generated revenues for extensive service improvements<sup>83</sup> that were attractive to the PAN's higher-income constituent base, many of who showed themselves willing to pay increased tariffs for improved water service. Increased revenues allowed for major service improvements: increasing water pressure throughout the network, decreasing the asbestos content in old pipes, and eliminating leaks and clandestine connections. From 2003 until 2010, levels of unaccounted-for water decreased from 54 to 33 percent and metering increased from 21.7 to 47 percent by 2010.<sup>84</sup>

As the city's water utility grew in stature, so did the political opportunities associated with being a board member. For example, the board presidency became a perfect stepping stone to the city's mayorship, where Board President Mario Turrent (2003–2006) received such high-profile press during his extensive reform period that as one interviewee recalled, “his electoral campaign was paid for,” and he became PAN mayor in 2006.<sup>85</sup>

The success of the water service improvements in Irapuato became a double-edged sword. Similar to San Miguel de Allende, the water utility's increasing revenues and reputation made it more attractive for mayoral intervention. One interviewee explained, “The largest budget within a municipality is for the water utility. Even the mayor does not manage that much money at his discretion.”<sup>86</sup> While PAN Mayors Salvador Pérez (1997–2000) and Ricardo Ortiz (2003–2006) had supported the citizen board's autonomy, PAN Mayor Luis Vargas (2006–2009) began to control the water utility more directly and bypass the citizen board. One interviewee explained, “from the mayor's perspective, it is attractive to have direct control, since you can have 350 positions to fill.”<sup>87</sup>

This trend toward decreased autonomy for the citizen board became most pronounced under PAN Mayor Jorge Estrada (2009–2012), who decided to reconfigure the citizen board and centralize the water utility under the municipal government.

Supported in closed-door agreements by the PAN governor of Guanajuato State, Juan Manuel Oliva (2006–2012), Estrada recentralized the water utility with such little fanfare that many citizens did not know that the citizen board had been marginalized. The business community, coupled with water technocrats, petitioned the mayor to reinstate the autonomous citizen board once they realized that it had been disbanded, but party leaders chose to ignore their pleas, not seeing these actors as a sufficient political threat that required them to limit partisan capture.<sup>88</sup>

The mayor retained the citizen board's institutional structure in order to access conditional federal funding that mandated citizen boards, but filled each board member position with City Council staff, including a board president who was also the city's director of public works.<sup>89</sup> Insiders say that the mayor preferred to be able to control the party lists more directly (and pick his successor) than to have a more independent board president who could make his own bid for mayor.<sup>90</sup> Observers cite this development as evidence of the decline in the PAN's pluralist agenda. One interviewee noted,

The PAN once used the participation philosophy to distinguish itself from the PRI, and beat the PRI. And now that the PAN is comfortably in power, participation threatens them . . . especially the citizen councils. It's the same hell but with a different devil.<sup>91</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Participatory innovation can be an important political resource for reformers, but, paradoxically, the success of citizen-led reforms can threaten their sustainability over time. This article examined two cities in Mexico that were “most likely” cases to successfully sustain participatory institutions, with attendant institutional, financial, and political support structures. Opposition parties used participatory rhetoric to gain office and initially supported participatory institutions. However, after the local PAN party became the incumbent party, the PAN saw participatory institutions as political liabilities that monopolized valuable financial and political spoils and fostered space for dissent. In these cases, the two initially successful participatory citizen boards succumbed to partisan control.

The purpose of this article was to identify a causal pathway from pluralism to partisan capture, specifying conditions that led politicians that were once supportive of creating participatory spaces for open participation to change their preferences for these institutions over time. While this article analyzed the two cases of San Miguel de Allende and Irapuato in Mexico, the principle finding of this article—that outsider parties who benefit politically from participatory rhetoric during elections may find that sustaining autonomous and pluralistic participatory institutions over time can become a political liability—can be found throughout Mexico. For example, when the PAN won municipal elections in cities such as Tijuana, Baja California, they supported pluralistic institutions that later fell prey to partisan control.<sup>92</sup> The PRD has also invested in local

participatory institutions with mixed degrees of sustainability over time, as case studies in PRD strongholds like Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico State, and Mexico City suggest.<sup>93</sup>

These changing preferences for supporting local participatory institutions echo similar dynamics occurring at the national level in a number of young democracies in Latin America. For example, Evo Morales' MAS party in Bolivia, whose electoral campaigns promised greater representation of indigenous rights and civil society groups, has over time moved to limit the participation of indigenous social movements and their allies who oppose MAS' economic policies.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, who was elected in 2006 by pledging more participatory governing structures and allying with indigenous and leftist social movements, over time has diminished support for open participation from these same groups.<sup>95</sup>

In these examples, outsider candidates challenging the status quo found participatory promises to be electorally useful during initial historic elections and to different degrees implemented participatory governing strategies upon entering office. However, over time, outsider candidates became incumbents, and open participation threatened their hold on power, as they became venues for dissent and fomenting of political opposition. These outcomes reveal a disturbing tension between democratization and participatory institution building, at least in the absence of societal forces that can serve as a check on partisan power grabbing.

The implications of these findings do not bode well for democracy and pluralism in consolidating democracies such as Mexico. The participatory institutions literature has focused on cases that have been initially successful or never took off, but few studies have outlined the factors for continued sustainability over time. Designing systematic comparisons of participatory institutions with mixed levels of sustainability, and especially identifying factors that have helped sustain participatory institutions over a longer period of time, would help move this research agenda forward. Does organized pressure from powerful sectors of society, such as social movements or industry, when they are interested in defending participatory autonomy, serve as a counterweight to presidentialist power grabbing at the local level, as hypothesized in this study? Do an open and dogged media, the presence of international monitoring programs, or third party accountability through institutions such as universities or NGOs make a difference? The answer to these questions will likely be context specific, but would paint a fuller, and hopefully more optimistic, picture of the likelihood of sustaining participatory venues in young democracies.

## NOTES

I thank Victor Lara and Ricardo Sandoval for their support in Guanajuato, and Tulia Falleti, Alison Post, Jefferey Sellers, Brian Wampler, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on prior drafts. Paz Rea, Colleen Phelan, and Gabriela Tafoya provided excellent research assistance, and I am grateful for financial support from Fulbright IIE, UC Mexus, and UCONN's College of Liberal Arts & Sciences.

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